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Community conferences

A community conference is probably the single most effective means for bringing about a community approach to common concerns and problems, involvement of the people and collective decision making.

In a great many cases the initiation of such a conference will be the responsibility of the municipal recreation committee. The committee and its professional staff are in a good position to identify and assess local areas of concern.

A community conference can only be successful when its intent and purposes are closely related to the interests and concerns felt and identified by the people who live in the community. It should be timed to capitalize on a peak of interest. A conference for the sake of a conference usually proves disastrous. A conference designed to deal with clearly defined problems and concerns can develop into collective decision making and action.

Bring together a few key individuals to determine the subject matter, objectives and anticipated outcomes. This step must be carefully planned so that the conference will be useful and directed toward follow-up action.

Some examples of conference purposes are:

to study and determine needs for youth services and programs as well as the ways and means of providing them—a youth conference;
to identify gaps in the communication lines of the community, areas of need, and plans for improvement—a communications conference;

to assess existing recreational services, and to establish priorities for meeting the needs—a recreation conference.

Only one or two major areas should be attacked at a particular conference. The concerns that the planning committee consider to have top priority should be dealt with first.

It takes from 3 to 6 months to plan a community conference. The mechanics must be planned as carefully as the agenda. It is effective to involve representatives of community agencies and organizations in the planning.

From the beginning, the planning committee must plan for the follow-up and action on resolutions and recommendations that will come from the conference. The participants must have a means to go on from the conference to action in the community.

Clarify the conference's purpose then take the following detailed steps:

1
What is the most suitable location and date?

The subject area will have a bearing on the length and location of the conference. Adequate room should be provided for the main sessions and for meals and small group discussions. The local school is usually most adequate and an excellent possibility.

2
Who is to be invited?

The success of any conference depends upon those who participate. Invite all individuals and groups concerned with the topic, and encourage others to attend. Too many participants may be unwieldy, so invite representatives of groups rather than entire organizations. It is impossible to list all those who should be invited but the following are indicative:

- school board authorities
- service clubs
- private agencies
- municipal agencies
- faculty agencies
- scouts, guides, etc.
- leisure clubs and organizations
- council members.

The response is usually better if the invitation is signed by the mayor, reeve, or warden. This initial invitation should include the specific purpose of the community conference and the date. Encourage suggestions from potential participants as to specific content and related concerns.

3
Form a conference committee and assign the following positions and responsibilities:

general co-ordinating chairman and vice-chairman
general secretary and recorders for conference sessions
registration and facilities arrangements
hospitality—coffee, meals, etc.
program outlines, discussion group leaders, tasks, etc.

4
Plan the program

Plan the community conference program well in advance to ensure that all topics will be covered. Make it reasonably flexible so that the participants themselves may change the format and/or content as the conference progresses. Consider and/or arrange for the following:

- sub-topics relating to main topic of concern.
- guidelines for small group discussion.
- contact a keynote speaker (if one is desired) well in advance, and
- clearly define for him the purpose of his presentation.
- chairmen or discussion leaders.

These should be capable individuals preferably from the community itself, recorders to report back to the main group. They should be briefed, contact additional resource people well in advance and define their role clearly.

Distribute pre-conference reading and resource materials in advance to all participants to enable them to come to the conference with a common body of knowledge and information.

The success of the conference will depend upon the time and consideration given to the program content and equipment. Such things as flip charts, markers, etc., are necessary for group recording and reporting.

5
Conference action and follow-up

Devote the latter part of the community conference to setting of priorities for follow-up action and plan the performance of these priorities. If possible, some commitment as to intended follow-up action should be obtained from those present.

Election or appointment of a "conference action committee" will help ensure continuity of follow-up action. It should not be the municipal recreation committee but a citizens' committee with representation from the municipal recreation committee. The conferences as a whole should give guidelines to this committee which will include compiling and distributing the conference report.

Although many of the details have been omitted, the above guidelines should assist in getting the conference "off the ground".

Involvement of the citizens in the community should be the overall aim of the conference as action can come only through their commitment. Arbitrary decisions affecting many in the community should never be made by a small select group. Use the community conference to involve members of the community in collective decision making and action on matters which effect them.